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ABSTRACT

To assess the impact of economic deprivation on students' reading scores in standardized tests, the vocabulary and reading comprehension portions of the California Achievement Test and the Degree of Reading Power test were admininstered to two groups of eighth grade students--60 students participating in the federal free lunch program and 60 students not participating. A test of mean differences between the two groups suggested that students receiving free lunches scored significantly lower on standardized reading tests than did students not using the lunch program and therefore assumed to be above the poverty guidelines. Comparisons of schools' test scores do not consider school differences in the percentages of children with moderate to severe economic deprivation. These results indicate, however, the need for sensitivity in comparing standardized reading scores among school programs. (MM)

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SAMPLING BIAS AND LIMITATIONS IN GENERALIZATIONS IN REPORTING SCORES ON STANDARDIZED AND CRITERION REFERENCED READING TESTS

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Considerable research has examined possible bases for the educational failure of many economically deprived, inner city children. The issue of variation in language between standard English and other vernaculars was given national notice by the "deficit hypothesis" (Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Deutsch, 1965). The proponents claimed that the speech of inner city deprived children was substandard English and was so deficient that it negatively effective communication and scholastic achievement. Many sociologists and a few linguists argued that the dialect of inner city, economically deprived, children was adequate (Bailey, 1969; Dillard, 1967; Labov, 1972). In studies of social dialects and identifiable vernaculars, the variable use of the past tense marker--ed and the third person singular present tense marker--s, and the copular system, were contrasted with standard English practices (Fasold, 1972; Wolframe, 1969). Stephensen, Reynolds, McClure, and Guthrie (1982) noted that Black English vernacular (BEV) speakers made significantly more errors with verbs on a cloze task than speakers of Standard English. Further, speakers of Black English vernacular had significantly more errors in selecting the appropriate temporal adverbial on the basis of tense. In main, differences in verbal systems determine specific differences in reading comprehension. Even differences in language between middle class teachers and economically deprived, inner city students have been demonstrated to be a major educational problem (Baratz, 1969; Wolfram & Fasold, 1964).

Beyond the characteristics of the different verbal systems of students tested for reading comprehension is the problem of reporting scores on standardized state tests of reading skills. Most scores are returned to school districts and to individual school buildings within the school district. No differences or classifications are made in scores by socioeconomic class, by deprivation, or by cultural bias. Mean scores by grade are reported for school buildings, and scores at each grade in one building are compared with mean scores in other buildings. Above all, no distinction is made between schools with moderate to severe economic deprivation and those with no children on federal lunch programs. No distinctions for cultural bias are ever made on reports to the daily press about scores in reading and mathematics.

This study assessed the hypothesis that a strict random sample of eighth grade students with economic deprivation, operationally defined as participating in the federal lunch program, would have significantly lower scores on reading comprehension on the California Achievement Test and the Degree of Reading Power (College Board, 1979) than non participants in the federal lunch program.

Method

SS were 120 middle school students in the eighth grade in a school district in Southeast Texas. There were 76 males and 44 females in the stratified random sample; ages ranged from 12 to 14 years. The sample comprised 45% of the eighth grade students at an intergrated public school. Based on the total number of children in the eighth grade, two groups were selected randomly:

(a) 60 students were eighth graders who accepting free lunch subsidized by the federal government, and (b) 60 students who were enrolled in the eighth grade of the middle school who were not participants in federal assistance programs.

Each student was administered in group situations the Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension portions of the California Achievement Test and the Degree of Reading Power (College Board, 1979). The former provided two raw scores on Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension and the latter one a total score in Reading Comprehension. Data were hand scored and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

When the mean CAT-Vocabulary Test score of Group A (M, 19.3; SD, 5.1) was compared with mean score of Group B (M, 14.2; SD, 4.4) a t ratio was 2.83 ($p < .01$). Comparisons between Group A and B on the CAT Comprehension gave a t test of mean differences of 2.62 ($P < .05$). When mean test scores for Group A and B on the Degree of Reading Power were compared, a significant t of 2.92 ($P < .01$) was obtained.

Economic deprivation, defined operationally as participating in the free lunch program, was associated with lower scores on Vocabulary-CAT and Reading Comprehension in the Degree of Reading Power. Students who were randomly selected from eighth grade students on the federal lunch program scored significantly lower on standardized reading tests than did students who were not on the federal lunch program and assumed to be above the poverty guidelines.

When school districts administer standardized tests in reading to all students at various grades, mean scores are reported for a grade level or a school building's reading program. Comaprisons between schools do not take into account the fact that some schools have a very high percentage of children with moderate to severe economic deprivation. There should be signs of great caution or great sensitivity in reporting standardized reading scores between and among school programs. There is some support for the fact that economically deprived students in federal assistance programs score lower on standardized reading tests than do students who are not registered in the federal assistance lunch program.

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